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A-ONE #1010   03/07/07

~ Pentagon Bans Google! ~ People Are Talking!   ~ Wikileaks Returns!
~ Samsung's 500GB Drive! ~ eBay's Growing Risks! ~ Vista Prices Cut!
~ CeBIT Greening Fails! ~ More FBI Violations! ~ Porn Spam Charges!

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     ~ 'Father of D&D' Dies!  ~ 'Army of Two' Partners ~ IE8 Test Version!

                    -* ICANN - US 'Pact' Ends in '09 *-
                  -* Yahoo Buys Some Time With Microsoft *-
                -* Spammers Get Past Security of Google Gmail *-




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->From the Editor's Keyboard                 "Saying it like it is!"
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Yep, another week, another dollar, er issue. Not much happening this
past week to really generate much writing interest. Last weekend's snow
has melted, replaced by rain and plenty of mud. I prefer it this way.
Here's hoping that warmer temperatures are coming, and here to stay for
awhile. A good sign of that lies in this weekend's Daylight Savings Time.
It's worth losing an hour of sleep to see the sun setting later and later
in the day!

I could rail on about the current state of the political dog and cat
fights going on in the presidential campaign, but what would be the,
point; it's all going to continue anyway. Gotta love it. The world will
go on, in its own insane fashion. If you can't beat 'em with
intelligence, beat 'em into submission with negativity! It's the American
way! Probably the worldwide way by now!

So, as we cautiously await the coming of a renewing spring season, enjoy
the simple things in life. Somehow, that process is invigorating.

Until next time...

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                         PEOPLE ARE TALKING
                        compiled by Joe Mirando
                          joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone, and
it's time to check out the UseNet for messages again. We're still
seeing a decrease in the number of messages, but we'll give it a whirl,
okay?

I've been doing some reading this past week on a bunch of subjects...
all of the things that interest me, but that I never used to have the
time to enjoy... politics, physics, MORE politics, etc. [grin]

Well, John McCain cinched the republican nomination this past week (even
though Ron Paul is technically still in the race, and Romney

technically only SUSPENDED his campaign) McCain has enough delegates to take the nomination), and the democrats Clinton and Obama are still locked in near-mortal combat for their party's nomination.

Will their campaigns turn nasty... or nastier than they have been? There are signs of that happening already. It's almost inevitable when you're talking about a race like this one. Even if these two were having a secret affair, they would keep on taking shots at each other. Why? Because it works, that's why. And McCain feels that he can go on about his business of campaigning while they "duke it out".

Well, that dog ain't gonna hunt either. Clinton and Obama will continue to grab the headlines while it becomes easier and easier for people to say, "John who??".

But you watch, boys and girls, once both parties have their nominees picked and polished up, things will go back to the way they've almost always been...

There are going to be plenty of things for both sides to whine about... the higher-ups have made sure of that from the get-go... C'mon... one of the most polarizing First Ladies in history, or a one-term senator who was a teenage cocaine addict, and a war hero POW who's still willing to countenance torture and the erosion of Civil Rights? How could you have picked a better bunch of lightning rods as candidates?

Okay, on to one of my other favorite subjects: Astronomy and physics. NASA said today that it had nailed down the age of the Universe with an uncertainty of +/- 120 million years. Mark it down on your calenders, kiddies... the Universe is officially 13.73 billion years old.

Of course, that's assuming that we know everything we need to know about the Universe in the first place. And THAT'S looking more and more uncertain as we gather more data on what's known as the PIONEER Anomaly. To date nine spacecraft have shown discrepancies in their speeds and trajectories that hint that maybe Newton and Einstein weren't completely right.... not that they were wrong, mind you, but that they just didn't have the whole story. To paraphrase a movie, "just imagine what you'll KNOW tomorrow".

The whole thing reminds me of an article in one of the major news magazines years ago. They were a general news magazine (I truly do not remember which one anymore), and they were trying to "smarten up" their issues to counteract the coverage they were giving to the "Intelligent Design vs. Evolution" debate, I guess.

Anyway, their cover story was on the Big Bang and the formation of the forces and dimensions we observe today. That's fine and dandy with me. But then an editor got involved. Now, anyone who's done any professional writing knows about editors. By and large, they simply go around looking for ways to justify their own existence. The major way they do this is by deciding on headlines.

Well, this particular editor decided to prove his worth by adding this headline (which appeared on the cover of the magazine): "THE BIG BANG: What Was It Like The Moment Before Time Began?"

Yep, that's right. Think about it a bit.

Well, now that I've ticked just about everyone off... Republicans,

Democrats, Newtonians, Einsteinians, Progressives, Fundamentalists, etc... let's bump some electrons together and see if we can make the UseNet sing, huh?

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Last week we mentioned Phantomm asking about a graphics display program. We got several answers, but there are a couple more this week, so we're going to take another look at the question:

"Years ago I remember a program for the ST/E and or Falcon that allowed you to view many different pictures/graphic files from different computer platforms including the Atari 8-bit machines. I think it also allowed you to convert them to some of the Atari 16 bit picture/graphics formats as well. I can't recall the name of the program, and there may have been more than one program that does this.

Anyhow I am looking for a ST/e-Falcon program(s) that allows viewing and converting of Atari 8-bit picture and graphics files. Also, a program or two that will allow the playing and converting of Atari 8-bit sound/music files on a ST/e-Falcon."

Rob Mahlert of Atari-Users.Net tells Phantomm:

"I was thinking of Speed of Light.. but I don't think that does 8 bit."

Our buddy Lonny Pursell tells Rob:

"More than likely it was one of the module based pic viewers like Gemview or Smurf. Gemview has quite a lot of import/export modules as does Smurf. The only other one that comes to mind is DEGAS, since Tom Hudson had his roots in the 8-bit world before jumping into the ST."

Phantomm replies:

"Someone mentioned LookNSee, which sounds like it.

I'm still searching through my software. Thing is, I have most of it boxed up so it's taking awhile to find it. I think it came on a Cover Disk of a magazine or I downloaded it from a BBS.

The program didn't have any fancy graphic displays, it was for the most part just in Text, and I think you just pressed a key for which ever option you wanted.

It may have been on a STart or AIM disk, I've not gotten into those yet."

Jos Vlietstra asks for help finding old copies of Cubase:

"I'm looking for the original software of old Cubase versions 1.0 to 2.5 I have a dongle of Steinberg, which I wanna test for what program it has been made. I'm also looking for the original software of PRO24 vers. 2.1

I have the dongle and the manual but I lost the disk."

'Charlie Copp' tells Jos:

"I really liked these programs, they still remain the best there are.

I have the original disks but here is an internet link to where they can be found: http://atari.music.free.fr/

Nobody seems to express much interest in this area, not as much as the people used to. Too bad, they don't know what they're missing!!!!!"

Paul Nurminen posts this about his Falcon PowerUp:

"Well, I received the new Falcon PSU from Best Electronics yesterday. The voltage is stable and up to specs. However, the Falcon still has the same issue - sometimes it boots, sometimes it doesn't (mostly, as of late, it doesn't).

So, I'm guessing the Nemesis is probably to blame, or some other tiny little problem, short, or bad component on the motherboard?

I certainly can't see any trouble with a visual inspection. Nothing looks burned out, everything is seated/connected (including all the wires and solder joints for the Nemesis. I even went through the Nemesis documentation step by step, to make sure everything was where it's supposed to be (it is).

Realistically, I don't have the time, or patience, to remove the Nemesis, and put everything back the way it was before the upgrade. I'm not really sure I'd even want to attempt it if I did. I've never won any soldering awards (hahaha).

Nor am I in a position to send it off to Wizztronics or ATY (if they'd even take it). The idea here was to sell something I don't really use much any more, but to get it into the hands of one of the Atari faithful. I'm not sure that's likely now, given the Falcon's current problem.

So, I'm at a loss. I now have one very temperamental Falcon, and two good Falcon power supplies...

Bottom line... if anyone feels like they still want to take this bird off my hands, and feels they have the technical know-how to fix the problem, by all means, I'm still open to offers."

Jo Even Skarstein tells Paul:

"I'm afraid that I haven't followed this thread closely so I might ask some questions that has already been answered.

1. Does the power LED on the keyboard light up when the Falcon doesn't boot?

2. Is there any floppy activity?

3. Is the screen always black when this happens?

If (1) and (3) I would guess that there's a problem with the DMA clock
patch, or the DSP clock. I would start by undoing the Nemesis DMA clock
patch (IIRC a resistor or capacitor patch near the DMA chip. I can't
recall the details, I removed the Nemesis from my Falcon in 2001.). If
that doesn't help, undo the DSP acceleration.

If the power LED doesn't light up or there's floppy activity when this
happens then there's something else that's wrong."

Paul replies:

"1. Yes, the power LED lights up.

2. No disk reading is attempted, but the floppy activity light
flickers.

3. Yes, the screen is always black.

Other "signs of life" are the fan spins up to speed, and the speaker
lets out a little pop when the Falcon is first powered on, and then
about every 6 seconds or so.

I removed the wire from the Nemesis to the circuit trace that's
near the DMA chip (this is the trace that you scrape away slightly
during the installation so you can solder this wire to it, as well one
leg of the tiny capacitor - who's other leg attaches to one of the
pins of the DMA chip itself.

Both removed. The only change was that I no longer heard the speaker
pop (not during power up / not every 6 seconds)."

Jo Even continues:

"If you only removed the wire the DMA chip has no clock. During
installation the clock feed to the DMA chip is cut somewhere, this has
to be restored. Try reinstalling the wire to the DMA, and undo the DSP
acceleration."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week,
same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying
when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - "Frontlines" Aims To Break Out!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""   'Army of Two', Getting Partners!
                                     'Father of D&D" Dies!
                                     And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
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"Frontlines" Aims To Break Out of Shooter Pack

At first blush, THQ's "Frontlines: Fuel of War" seems like just another
entrant in a recent string of military-themed shooter video games. But a
few tricks could set it apart enough to turn it into a sorely needed
success for THQ, which struggled last year with lackluster reviews and
poor sales.

The game is set in 2024, and a "peak oil" energy crisis has sparked a
global war over resources with Russia and China in one corner and the
United States and Europe in the other.

"We started researching it and we were blown away by how real these
theories could be and how dependent our modern society is on that
affordable, cheap oil," David Votypka, the game's design director, said
in an interview.

The single-player portion of the game drops the player in a combat zone
with a constantly updated list of missions. Where many games, like last
year's hit "Call of Duty 4," have players follow a set path, "Frontlines"
chose an "open-world" model.

"Now the question isn't 'What did the designers want me to do here?' but
'What approach makes the most sense here?'," read one review on gaming
news site 1Up.com.

For instance, a player tasked with taking an enemy compound could try to
barge in with a tank, fly remote drones to blow up key fortifications, or
simply mount an infantry assault.

"The combination of organic level design and a broad weapon set allows
for unusually realistic and creative approaches to your mission
objectives," 1Up said.

1Up and other reviewers also complained of ho-hum graphics and visual
glitches, and some felt the open-world model didn't make up for a dull
single-player experience. The game has a middling score of 74 on
Metacritic, which rates video games.

Much of the negativity was due to early glitches in the online play,
which is where "Frontlines" is trying to break new ground with battles
that can include 50 players, far more than other popular Xbox 360
shooters like "Halo 3."

Initially, jerky on-screen movement made the game all but unplayable, but
Votypka said the problems have been fixed.

When running properly, reviewers have marveled at the epic scale and
ability of players to drive off-road vehicles and tanks, and pilot jets

and helicopters. Gamers can also choose specialized roles that give them have the ability to operate drones, repair vehicles or call in air strikes.

If that sounds like the PC game "Battlefield 2," that's because THQ hired a team of developers who worked on that title, which was published by Electronic Arts in 2005.

"Frontlines" is the first game built from the ground up by what is now known as Kaos Studios. In a game industry version of rags-to-riches, Kaos's leaders got their start as amateurs creating a free add-on to transform EA's World War II shooter "Battlefield 1942" into a modern game set in the Middle East.

THQ is banking that "Frontlines" is hitting the market at a time when most gamers are starting to tire of the games they got last holiday season.

There are signs that THQ could have a modest hit on its hands. Gamefly, which rents games via mail, said "Frontlines" was its second-most requested game last week. The game has also hit number four on the UK sales chart.

THQ Chief Executive Brian Farrell said last month that the company was counting on "Frontlines" to drive sales this quarter, but that it was still taking a "conservative approach financially" to the game.

"That being said, we're very, very proud of the quality and how it shines as a multiplayer game," Farrell said. "We think it has a tremendous hook - unlike its competition, it's not linear in script, it's very open-world, so it's a very different game."

Get A Partner for 'Army of Two'

It's not flawless, but the buddy system works.

In Electronic Arts' Army of Two, you get an impressive co-op hampered by erratic intelligence and an underwhelming campaign.

You control Salem and Rios. They're mercenaries reaping the benefits of a military environment heavily dependent on private contractors. The pair deploys to locales such as Iraq, Afghanistan and China to complete covert missions.

Army of Two implements an intuitive system requiring a true team effort to advance. This may involve hoisting your partner above a platform while he picks off enemies. When parachuting into hostile territory, one may steer the chute while the other serves as a sniper.

The directional pad hosts three commands for your partner: advance, regroup and hold position. Press once for a defensive posture, or twice for a more aggressive approach. When someone is injured, either character will drag the other to safety to heal and return to the fight.

A key component to co-op play is the use of Aggro, an aggression meter measuring which character enemies are most focused on. If you draw all the attention, your character turns red as you dodge a hail of gunfire.

If it happens to your partner, you turn nearly invisible, allowing you to secretly flank enemies for easy kills. If the Aggro meter holds long enough, you'll then enter a brief overkill mode which greatly enhances your battlefield skills.

Army of Two's arsenal is fantastic. The duo huddles with arms dealers to accumulate a bevy of primary and secondary firearms. Each can be modified for maximum damage and accuracy. As you complete objectives, you earn cash toward upgrading your weapons.

Enemy artificial intelligence is pretty sharp. They flank, utilize cover effectively and are clever enough to try to flush you out into the open. Aggro is rather tough to abuse. In sections where I traveled in an "invisible" state, I made the mistake of entering an opponent's line of sight and was immediately mowed down.

Too bad your partner's AI isn't as smart. He doesn't necessarily weigh you down, but he's inconsistent. He was most useful in holding position and drawing enemy fire while I snuck around systematically picking off foes. During advance or regroup, he avoided cover and would take heavy damage. Having a human-controlled partner makes a major difference in the experience.

Environments are unique and vibrant. Hulking mercenaries looked incredibly intimidating. The campaign, however, was rather forgettable. Firefights were intense at times, but every level fizzled out, especially the final mission. Mid-mission shopping feels cheap and unrealistic. The arms dealer must have great connections with UPS if he can get you weapons aboard an aircraft carrier in the middle of a firefight.

Salvaging the campaign is a solid multiplayer component. The options are few, but far more satisfying, especially with a human partner. Instead of focusing solely on kills, your objectives revolve around obtaining the most money possible. Goals include assassinating enemy targets and rescuing injured combatants. You must do so, however, against another twosome as well as hordes of regional foes.

Hidden within Army of Two is a decent shooter co-op fans can embrace. But no matter how clever the team skills, the game squanders some of its potential on an average campaign and an AI partner who has you yearning for a solo adventure.

Germans Move to Games Consoles from PCs

German video gamers, long wedded to their personal computers, are switching to games consoles and mobile devices, pushing German games software sales up 21 percent to 1.36 billion euros ($2.1 billion) last year.

The German games software association (BIU) said on Friday sales of games for consoles such as the Nintendo Wii, Sony PlayStation or Microsoft Xbox rose 38 percent to 904 million euros in 2007.

By contrast, sales of PC games slipped 3 percent to 458 million euros.

Games for mobile devices were the fastest-growing segment of the market,

with sales rising 65 percent to 360 million euros as more casual gamers
entered the market, the BIU said.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online   -   Online Users Growl & Purr!
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                  Gary Gygax, 'Father of D&D,' Dies at 69

Gary Gygax, one of the co-creators of the Dungeons & Dragons role-playing
game, died Tuesday morning at his home in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin,
according to Stephen Chenault, CEO of Troll Lord Games.

Gygax designed the original D&D game with Dave Arneson in 1974, and went
on to create the Dangerous Journeys and Lejendary Adventure RPGs, as well
as a number of board games. He also wrote several fantasy novels.

"I don't think I've really grokked it yet," said Mike Mearls, the lead
developer of the upcoming 4th edition of Dungeons and Dragons. "He was
like the cool uncle that every gamer had. He shaped an entire generation
of gamers."

Gygax was not directly involved with Dungeons & Dragons after 1985, and
his relationship with his former company, TSR Inc., was not friendly at
first. The company sued him over his competing game Dangerous Journeys,
and in a 2004 interview with GameSpy he stated that he was "pleased to
say" that he thought the cost of the suit and settlement drove TSR to
sell the rights to the game.

While reportedly unimpressed with the current edition of the Dungeons and
Dragons game, he created adventures and settings that could be used with
it, which were published by Troll Lord Games.

Gygax went well beyond the role of game developer and became an icon to
gamers, appearing as himself in episodes of Futurama and Code Monkeys and
participating in discussions on roleplaying-related message boards.

Gygax had been in poor health for some time, according to his wife Gail.
Chenault says he will publish more information, including funeral
arrangements, on the Troll Lord message board as it becomes available.

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                       A-ONE's Headline News
                  The Latest in Computer Technology News
                      Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Wikileaks is back in business. In the face of widespread media attention
and action from rights groups, a federal judge on Friday reversed his
decision to shut down the whistle-blower Web site.

"It is clear that in all but the most exceptional circumstances, an
injunction restricting speech pending final resolution of the
constitutional concerns is impermissible," wrote U.S. District Court Judge
Jeffrey White in San Francisco.

Swiss bank Julius Baer filed a legal complaint and, after an initial
review, White ordered Dynadot, a California Web-hosting company, to
"immediately clear and remove" records from Wikileaks and "prevent the
domain name from resolving to the Wikileaks.org Web site or any other Web
site or server other than a blank page" until he could undertake a closer
review.

Wikileaks.org allowed anonymous posting of documents, including those
disclosing U.S. Army operations at GuantÏ¿‰namo Bay, Cuba; human-rights
abuses in China; and political corruption in Kenya. But when documents
from the Swiss bank showed up, that marked the beginning of a new look at
First Amendment law.

Free-speech and privacy advocates, including the American Civil Liberties
Union, objected to the takedown. The judge's order was largely
ineffective because versions of the site hosted throughout the world
remained online and even the Wikileaks site itself was still available at
its numerical address.

According to Mark G. McCreary, an attorney with Fox Rothschild LLP in
Philadelphia, it appears the judge acknowledged that the injunction went
too far by including the entire Web site, rather than just the
complained-about documents. However, for all the headlines about
Wikileaks' reprieve, he doesn't sees a deeper story.

From McCreary's perspective, the most interesting aspect of the case so
far is how the Internet community responded to the takedown by mirroring
the Web site elsewhere and posting the controversial Swiss bank documents
across the Web. Most people dismissingly comment that the "virtual world"
has no real effect on the real world, he said, but this was a real-world
example of the consequences of actions in the virtual world.

"Whether the effect would be as foreseeable as creating extremely
negative press as a result of overreaching corrective measures - taking
down the entire site versus removing specific documents - or as
unforeseeable as having the financial health of your bank affected as a
result of the negative press," McCreary said, "it is clear that the
Internet community that is concerned with freedom of speech, even if not
specifically Wikileaks.org, was not going to let this aggressive and
scattershot approach stand."

McCreary's point is that businesses too often fail to consider whether the
steps they take to thwart information on the Web will end up putting them
in a worse position than the information itself.

While noting he only has limited information on the Wikileaks case,
McCreary said he saw nothing that put the bank under any duty to have the

leaked information taken down. Instead, he said, the bank is getting international attention it doesn't want.

"What attention would there have been to these documents if the posting just remained, untouched, on Wikileaks.org?" McCreary asked. "It makes you wonder if anyone in the decision-making process in this case asked that question. What would the story have been if the injunction covered only the complained-about documents? This occurrence may be yet another example of pigs getting fat and hogs getting slaughtered."

Yahoo Buys Time With Microsoft by Board Move

Yahoo Inc extended a deadline to nominate board directors, buying the company time to pursue alternatives to Microsoft Corp's $41.7 billion offer, while also giving Yahoo room to negotiate a friendly deal with Microsoft.

The original March 14 deadline could have catapulted Microsoft and Yahoo into a formal proxy contest next week. Instead, Yahoo said on Wednesday the deadline would fall 10 days after it announces the date for its annual shareholder meeting, which has yet to be scheduled.

Yahoo has explored tie-ups with several other Internet and media companies that would allow it to retain more independence. Delaying board nominations reduces the pressure on Microsoft to turn hostile in its takeover strategy in which it could nominate an alternative slate of Yahoo directors.

Talks about a deal with Time Warner Inc's AOL unit have accelerated, a person briefed on the discussions said on Wednesday. News Corp and Yahoo are still discussing possible options, a source familiar with the talks said.

A Yahoo spokeswoman declined to comment the board actions beyond its previous statement that the company and its directors are continuing to consider all strategic options.

Canaccord Adams analyst Colin Gillis said the move was a delaying tactic by Yahoo as Chief Executive Jerry Yang looks for an alternative to Microsoft.

"It's a sign he doesn't really have any viable alternatives. He's trying to buy more time to dig up other solutions," said Gillis.

Gillis said it would be best for both companies if they could work out a deal.

"Microsoft has time working against it," he said. "They don't want to spend six months doing the dance with the (Yahoo) board and 12 months waiting for a deal to close."

After more than a year of intermittent talks, Yahoo rebuffed an offer that Microsoft made public on February 1 valuing the company at $31 per share in cash and stock. Based on current share prices, the deal would value Yahoo at $27 per share.

Yahoo shares rose 2 percent to $28.62 in early trading on the Nasdaq,

indicating investors still expect Microsoft to sweeten its offer. Microsoft gained 2.6 percent to $28.31.

Such tactics are common in takeover battles. BEA Systems Inc delayed nominating directors in December for its annual meeting, setting the stage for negotiations that led BEA to accept a sweetened $8.5 billion bid by Oracle in January.

"It's an indication that probably Yahoo is less receptive to Microsoft than was initially believed," said analyst Jeffrey Lindsay of Sanford C. Bernstein, referring to the extension.

"It looks as if they've bought themselves several weeks by proposing this delay," he said. "It's probably the maximum they can do without incurring a lot more shareholder ill-will."

Yahoo Chief Executive Jerry Yang told employees in a letter that the extension would still allow Microsoft to nominate directors to its board, but the main aim was to create some breathing room.

"In light of the current circumstances, this change removes an imminent deadline," Yang said in the letter, which was filed with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

"Microsoft, of course, could still choose to name directors, but our objective here is to enable our board to continue to explore all of its strategic alternatives for maximizing value for stockholders without the distraction of a proxy contest," Yang said.

Yahoo has said the Microsoft offer significantly undervalues its worth, including a user base of nearly 500 million people, as well as lucrative overseas holdings. Wall Street had viewed that as an effort to wrest a higher price from Microsoft.

Microsoft, for its part, has not publicly budged from its original offer.

"We are fully aware of our options," a person close to Microsoft said.

Yahoo has yet to set a date for its annual shareholder meeting, which took place on June 12 last year and under Delaware laws - where Yahoo is incorporated - has up to 13 months to hold its next annual meeting. Companies must notify shareholders of a meeting date 10 to 60 days ahead of time.

Pentagon Bans Google Teams from Bases

The Pentagon has banned Google Earth teams from making detailed street-level video maps of U.S. military bases.

A message sent to all Defense Department bases and installations around the country late last week told officials to not allow the popular mapping Web site from taking panoramic views inside the facilities.

Michael Kucharek, spokesman for U.S. Northern Command, told The Associated Press on Thursday that the decision was made after crews were allowed access to at least one base. He said military officials were concerned that allowing the 360-degree, street-level video could provide

sensitive information to potential adversaries and endanger base personnel.

His comments came just a few days after published reports suggested that protesters used Google Earth to help plot their access to the roof of the Parliament building in London.

Spammers Get Past Security Into Google's Gmail

When you sign up for an e-mail account at Google's Gmail, you have to navigate past a CAPTCHA - squiggly words and letters that need to be typed into a box to prove you're human and not an automated system looking to send spam. But in the war against spammers, CAPTCHAs are not holding up well and the latest attacks let spambots into Gmail.

CAPTCHA stands for "Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart." Typically image files, the challenge-and-response system has been fairly successful in preventing spammers from opening e-mail accounts on popular Web domains like Gmail, Yahoo and Hotmail. Those accounts are prized by spammers because Web administrators can't simply blacklist the popular domains.

Spammers have found ways to break CAPTCHAs, according to Stephan Chenette, manager of Websense Security Labs. "What we're seeing is the technology on the hacker side has surpassed the simple CAPTCHAs," Chenette told us. "In the public domain there are several tools available right now for everyone to use to break simple CAPTCHAs."

Chenette said organized attackers are using automated tools to sign up for Gmail and other Web-mail accounts. When the CAPTCHA image appears, it's automatically sent off to a large and low-paid workforce, typically in another country, where a worker enters the code and sends it back so the account can be created.

This type of attack has been used against other Web-mail sites, Chenette said, but in the attacks on Gmail there's a new wrinkle. "One of the more interesting things about the Gmail CAPTCHA breaking is that we believe that this might be happening through an automated process, which is the next step to breaking CAPTCHAs as opposed to hiring a large workforce to break them," he said.

In fact, Chenette believes these are two-pronged attacks. The first uses the offshore workforce, while the second may rely on bot networks, large sets of compromised computers that work together for attackers. Websense experts can see how often CAPTCHAs are being broken, and for the Gmail traffic there's only a 20 percent success rate for one prong of the attack.

"It would be very odd if a human would fail one out of five times in understanding what that CAPTCHA was," Chenette said. "From that we conclude it's possibly a bot network with automated tools involved."

Most of the IP addresses and networks involved in these attacks are from the United States, Chenette said. But when he visited some of the Web pages, the text was in Russian, leading Websense to conclude that the authors - who specify a pay rate of $3 per broken CAPTCHA - are likely Russian as well. That wouldn't be a surprise. "In malicious activity in

general, the U.S., Russia, China and Brazil are the top offending countries," he said.

Douglas Merrill, vice president of engineering at Google, told us that the CAPTCHA attacks are being dealt with quickly and he has no concern that this is the tip of a larger security issue. "We've disabled the accounts that were set up as result of CAPTCHA violation. But this does not in any way weaken the security of our users or our users' Gmail. We have many, many layers of security, technical and physical, in place at Google to secure information, and those layers remain strong," he said.

Despite the attacks on Web-mail providers, CAPTCHAs are not dead yet. Websense's Chenette suggested that making them more difficult will make it more difficult for humans as well, so he recommended using CAPTCHAs as one of several steps in authenticating. Newer versions of CAPTCHAs play an audio file that the user listens to and types, so that may help stave off malicious attacks for a while.

But only for a while. "We can't underestimate the malicious community, because they are a hired workforce of very capable programmers, with a mission of gaining profit," Chenette said. And spam remains a very profitable business.

More FBI Privacy Violations Confirmed

The FBI acknowledged Wednesday it improperly accessed Americans' telephone records, credit reports and Internet traffic in 2006, the fourth straight year of privacy abuses resulting from investigations aimed at tracking terrorists and spies.

The breach occurred before the FBI enacted broad new reforms in March 2007 to prevent future lapses, FBI Director Robert Mueller said. And it was caused, in part, by banks, telecommunication companies and other private businesses giving the FBI more personal client data than was requested.

Testifying at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, Mueller raised the issue of the FBI's controversial use of so-called national security letters in reference to an upcoming report on the topic by the Justice Department's inspector general.

An audit by the inspector general last year found the FBI demanded personal records without official authorization or otherwise collected more data than allowed in dozens of cases between 2003 and 2005. Additionally, last year's audit found that the FBI had underreported to Congress how many national security letters were requested by more than 4,600.

The new audit, which examines use of national security letters issued in 2006, "will identify issues similar to those in the report issued last March," Mueller told senators. The privacy abuse "predates the reforms we now have in place," he said.

"We are committed to ensuring that we not only get this right, but maintain the vital trust of the American people," Mueller said. He offered no additional details about the upcoming audit.

National security letters, as outlined in the USA Patriot Act, are administrative subpoenas used in suspected terrorism and espionage cases. They allow the FBI to require telephone companies, Internet service providers, banks, credit bureaus and other businesses to produce highly personal records about their customers or subscribers without a judge's approval.

Last year's audit by Justice Department Inspector General Glenn A. Fine, issued March 9, 2007, blamed agent error and shoddy record-keeping for the bulk of the problems and did not find any indication of criminal misconduct. Fine's latest report is expected to be released as early as next week.

Several Justice Department and FBI officials familiar with the upcoming 2006 findings have said privately the new audit will show national security letters were used incorrectly at a similar rate as during the previous three years.

The number of national security letters issued by the FBI skyrocketed in the years after the Patriot Act became law in 2001, according to last year's report. Fine's annual review is required by Congress, over the objections of the Bush administration.

In 2005, for example, Fine's office found more than 1,000 violations within 19,000 FBI requests to obtain 47,000 records. Each letter issued may contain several requests.

In contrast to the strong concerns expressed by Congress and civil liberties groups after last year's inspector general's report was issued, Mueller's disclosure drew no criticism from senators during just over two hours of testimony Wednesday.

Speaking before the FBI chief, Senate Judiciary Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., urged Mueller to be more vigilant in correcting what he called "widespread illegal and improper use of national security letters."

"Everybody wants to stop terrorists. But we also, though, as Americans, we believe in our privacy rights and we want those protected," Leahy said. "There has to be a better chain of command for this. You cannot just have an FBI agent who decides he'd like to obtain Americans' records, bank records or anything else and do it just because they want to."

Following last year's audit, the Justice Department enacted guidelines that sternly reminded FBI agents to carefully follow the rules governing national security letters. The new rules caution agents to review all data before it is transferred into FBI databases to make sure that only the information specifically requested is used.

Fine's upcoming report also credits the FBI with putting the additional checks in place to make sure privacy rights aren't violated, according to a Justice official familiar with its findings.

Critics seized on Mueller's testimony as proof that a judge should sign off on the national security letters before they are issued.

"The credibility factor shows there needs to be outside oversight," said former FBI agent Michael German, now a national security adviser for the American Civil Liberties Union. He also cast doubt on the FBI's reforms.

"There were guidelines before, and there were laws before, and the FBI violated those laws," German said. "And the idea that new guidelines would make a difference, I think cuts against rationality."

Greening of CeBIT Fails To Revive Shrinking IT Fair

Europe's biggest information technology fair went green this year. The problem was that there weren't many people around to notice.

CeBIT 2008 was a slimmed-down, serious affair, cut back to six days from seven. Formerly sprawling exhibits were corralled into order by theme and publicity stunts banished to the weekend that now comes at the end of the show, not the middle.

The idea was to turn dwindling exhibitor and visitor interest into a virtue by using the lack of gadgety distractions to create a business-like arena where managers could get on with meeting, greeting and checking out the competition.

The result was an atmosphere free of the chaos of previous years but also devoid of excitement, casting a feeling of desertion over the vast trade-fair grounds in the northern German city of Hanover.

"We decided to do product launches globally at CES," said Michael Langbehn, in charge of PR and marketing in Germany for electronics maker Panasonic (6752.T), referring to the huge annual consumer electronics show held in January in Las Vegas.

"Then there's IFA, which is a must," he added, meaning the August/September consumer gadgets fair in Berlin that has drawn electronics makers and the German public away from CeBIT.

"And then consider the BRIC countries, which also have their own fairs that are growing."

Like most exhibitors who still elect to come to CeBIT - this year there are 5,845 of them, 5 percent down from last year - Panasonic is using CeBIT to explain its less glamorous business-system products to potential clients.

Talk of "solutions" of all kinds - vertical, digital and security - abounded at the fair.

Cisco was one of the few to talk about the problems demanding these solutions as it launched a new Internet router to help cope with a surge in monthly data sent over the Internet to 29 exabytes by 2011 - equivalent to 144 times all the world's printed matter.

CeBIT organizers declared the theme of this year's show to be the environment and built a "green village" to house companies peddling products to boost corporate energy efficiency and reduce toxic waste.

"CeBIT Goes Green - Big Time" was the main headline of the official CeBIT News on Wednesday, recognizing that "green IT" is a trend impossible to ignore as both energy costs and climate-altering carbon emissions soar.

Microsoft Chief Executive Steve Ballmer, by far the highest-profile

speaker at CeBIT, conformed with the trend by announcing a deal with German energy provider Yello Strom for technology to display electricity consumption on a home PC.

But most journalists were only interested in quizzing him on Microsoft's campaign to buy Yahoo in a bid currently valued at $42 billion.

The information and communications industry has overtaken aviation in terms of carbon emissions believed to cause global warming, accounting for just over 2 percent of emissions, according to research firm IDC.

The picture is complicated, however, by the hidden environmental cost of transporting electronic parts around the world to assemble them where labor is cheap as well as the fact that IT can cut the need for travel to face-to-face meetings.

Environmental group Greenpeace promised a hard look at the green claims of electronics manufacturers, driven more by a need to cut costs than a desire to save the planet.

At a sparsely attended news conference, it singled out products from Apple, Sony Ericsson and Nokia for praise while cautioning, "It's not enough just to offer a green computer for the tree-huggers."

Greenpeace's "could do better" verdict on the industry - following a gadget survey severely limited by manufacturers' willingness to cooperate - could apply to the new-concept CeBIT as a whole.

CeBIT continues in Hanover until Sunday.

ICANN Looks Toward End of U.S. Agreement

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) is starting to look at how the organization might function after its current memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Department of Commerce expires in September 2009.

ICANN, the nonprofit group that manages the Internet domain name system, has suggested it should become independent of Commerce Department oversight when the current Joint Project Agreement (JPA) with the agency expires. The agency's memorandum of understanding with ICANN has been in place since 1998, but in recent years, representatives of some other countries have questioned why the U.S. government should have primary oversight of the organization.

ICANN has made significant improvements in accountability, transparency and other issues since the Commerce Department renewed the agreement in September 2006, said Paul Levins, ICANN's executive officer and vice president of corporate affairs. ICANN's goal after the Commerce Department agreement ends, he said, is to expand a global governance model that allows input from a broad range of Internet communities.

"What we're trying to do is ensure that the accountablities that the organization has now, the responsibilities to all the stakeholders, are locked in place forever," Levins said Friday. "We want to try to lock in the existing model over the long term."

Some people have suggested the JPA should remain in place to provide accountability. "The fact that ICANN is making progress toward meeting its responsibilities does not imply that the JPA is no longer needed," Thomas Lenard, president and senior fellow at conservative think tank iGrowthGlobal, wrote in comments about the agreement. "Indeed, it may demonstrate the value of the JPA. The JPA and the continuing tie to the Department of Commerce may account for ICANN's good performance."

Questions about ICANN's future have come up during a midterm review of the Commerce Department agreement. The public was invited to comment on the agreement and the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration hosted a public hearing on the agreement in late February.

As a nonprofit, ICANN operates with "almost no oversight," Lenard added in his comments. "ICANN is a unique organization," he wrote. "It is a nonprofit corporation under California law, but unlike literally any other nonprofit, ICANN makes decisions of major economic and social consequence throughout the world."

The Center for Democracy and Technology and TechNet, a trade group representing tech senior executives, both advocated for a continued agreement with the Commerce Department.

But the expiration of the U.S. agreement would still leave ICANN with accountability, Levins said. ICANN still has a contract with the U.S. to operate the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), and its board members are elected by several groups. The organization must follow California law governing nonprofits, Levins said, and in a "next steps" document, it has proposed a procedure for removing the board if enough of the nominating groups agree on removal.

Some other people commenting on ICANN's performance have suggested the organization hasn't made enough progress on its goals under the Commerce Department agreement. The organization hasn't done enough work on internationalized domain names "to empower local non-English speaking communities," wrote Khaled Fattal, chairman and CEO of Live Multilingual Translator, a company providing online English-to-Arabic translations. ICANN's inactivity on internationalized domain names has "seriously damaged potential good faith, trust, and belief in ICANN's competence in the eyes of the very people ICANN is seeking to appeal to today," Fattal wrote.

But many of the comments on ICANN during the midterm review were positive. "It is our opinion that ICANN is living up to its mandate and that the endeavor of transitioning ICANN into a private sector entity is taking shape," wrote Anthony Mugambi, chairman of the Kenya Network Information Centre. "Conclusion of the JPA would, however, provide the next logical step toward full transition some time in the future."

ICANN's Levins said the organization is paying attention to criticisms. ICANN "could and should always do more," he said. "Is there even a point where you can say... security and stability are done?"

But the organization also wants to more toward being more autonomous, as has been the stated goal of the agreement with the Commerce Department, he said. ICANN will begin engaging stakeholders about how a transition should work in the coming months, he said.

"The [Internet] addressing system is so fundamental," he said. "We need

to make sure that can't change and there isn't a point at which any one entity is able to change that, or can reconfigure that somewhere down the track."

Company Settles Porn Spam Charges

An adult Web site whose affiliates sent pornography-related spam to unsuspecting recipients will pay US$413,000 to settle a complaint from the U.S. Federal Trade Commission.

Under the settlement, Cyberheat is prohibited from spam e-mail marketing and is required to monitor its affiliates to ensure they are complying with the law, the FTC said.

Cyberheat, in Tucson, Arizona, is the sixth company that has settled FTC complaints about porn spam since 2005. A complaint against a seventh company is pending. The six companies that have settled the 2005 complaints have agreed to pay more than $1.6 million in civil penalties. The FTC had accused the companies of exposing children and others to sexual images. The spam e-mail was the equivalent of "electronic flashing," the FTC said.

The FTC alleged that Cyberheat violated the agency's FTC's Adult Labeling Rule and the Can-Spam Act, which require commercial e-mailers of sexually explicit material to use the phrase "sexually explicit" in subject lines. The rule and law also require that e-mail senders ensure that the initially viewable area of the e-mail does not contain graphic sexual images. Cyberheat's affiliate markets also did not provide adequate opt-out mechanisms in their e-mail and did not provide a postal address for the company, the FTC said. Can-Spam requires both.

FTC filed the complaint against Cyberheat and the settlement in U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona.

Cyberheat did not send e-mail directly to consumers, but the company operated an affiliate marketing program, in which it paid others who sent spam on the company's behalf, the FTC said. Under Can-Spam, the company is liable for the illegal spam sent by its affiliates because the defendant induced them to send it by offering to pay those who successfully attracted subscriber to its Web sites, the FTC alleged.

Microsoft Cuts Vista Prices To Urge Upgrades

Microsoft Corp said on Thursday it plans to cut prices of its Windows Vista operating system sold at retail outlets in a move aimed at pushing customers to switch to the newest version of Windows.

The world's largest software maker said it plans to lower retail prices for Vista in 70 countries later this year in tandem with the shipment of the first major update to Vista, known as Service Pack 1 (SP1).

Packaged versions of Windows Vista sold at stores and on the Web account for less than 10 percent of all licenses of the dominant Windows operating system that sits on more than 90 percent of the world's personal

computers.

Most consumers opt to buy a new PC, which comes preloaded with the latest version of Windows.

"We anticipate these changed will provide greater opportunities ... to sell more stand-alone copies of Windows," said Brad Brooks, a Microsoft corporate vice president.

In the United States, Microsoft will reduce prices for Windows Vista Ultimate, the company's top-end operating system, to $319 from $399 for the full version and cut the price for an "upgrade" version to $219 from $259 for consumers who already run Windows XP or another edition of Vista.

It also cut prices for upgrade versions of Vista Home Premium, its mainstream product, to $129 from $159. The price cuts vary by country.

In emerging markets, Microsoft will stop selling "upgrade" versions of Vista, because, for many customers, it will be the first purchase of a genuine copy of Windows. The company will instead sell Vista Home Premium and Home Basic, a stripped-down version, at the upgrade prices.

Microsoft has sold more than 100 million licenses of Vista since its January 2007 release and its adoption has underpinned strong earnings results at the company in recent quarters.

Nonetheless, some consumers have raised issues with Vista's performance, stringent hardware requirement and lack of support for other software and devices like printers. Microsoft said it would continue to sell Windows XP until June 2008, delaying a scheduled transition to Vista.

Brooks, who oversees consumer marketing of Vista, said he is confident the company can bring in enough new customers to offset the revenue declines from lowering prices after seeing the results of a recent three-month promotional trial of lower Vista prices.

The announcement comes on the heels of sales data that showed a 30 percent drop in money spent for software at U.S. retailers in January, according to market research firm NPD.

Microsoft said the announcement is unrelated to the sales data, which the company said could be a result of inventory build-up after the holiday shopping season.

Samsung First To Ship 500GB Laptop Hard Drive

Samsung Electronics is the first hard drive manufacturer to ship a 500GB 2.5-inch drive. Samsung announced its drive was shipping in volume to OEMs and PC makers today.

The 500GB drive marks a significant milestone in portable storage: On notebooks that support dual-hard drive configurations, a 500GB drive means you can have a whopping 1TB of storage in a laptop computer.

Hitachi was the first company to announce a 500GB 2.5-inch hard drive, before the start of the 2008 International Consumer Electronics Show.

Samsung was the second to announce, also at the show; Fujitsu also recently announced its intention to offer a 500GB drive.

However, both Hitachi and Fujitsu are taking a different approach to 500GB than Samsung. All three drive makers use three disk platters, but Hitachi and Fujitsu reach 500GB by expanding the height of the drive from 9.5mm - the common standard for most notebooks - to 12.5mm, a height that's increasingly accommodated on larger, desktop-replacement laptop designs, but not necessarily on more general-use laptops.

Samsung's Spinpoint M6 drive spins at 5,400 rpm (revolutions per minute). Hitachi's drive carries the same rating, but Fujitsu slowed its drive to 4200 rpm.

Hitachi's drive was supposed to ship in February, but is now expected to ship later this month. Fujitsu says its drive will ship in May.

Since the Spinpoint M6 fits into the chassis of commercial and multimedia notebooks, said Andy Higginbotham, director of hard drive sales at Samsung Semiconductor. Two drives can be combined for 1TB of storage, he said. Priced at $299, the hard drive is shipping now to OEMs and PC makers and will be in retail stores later this month. A company spokeswoman declined to comment on which PC makers will be using the drive; nor would a spokeswoman say when we might see a notebook using the drive.

At the Consumer Electronics Show earlier this year, Asus announced the M70S laptop, which combined two 500GB drives from Hitachi. Samsung also announced the Spinpoint MP2 hard drive, a 2.5-inch drive with 250GB of storage. Aimed at desktop replacement notebooks, workstations and blade servers, it provides quicker read and write speeds than the M6. The hard drive spins at 7,200 rpm. With the MP2, the company also provides an optional chip that protects a hard drive from vibrations caused by other hardware components. The Spinpoint MP2 is priced at $299 and will be available through retailers. An 80GB version
of the hard drive is also available, according to the company. Both drives come with a free-fall sensor that OEMs can opt for; the sensor can park the head and turns the hard drive off in the event of a fall, protecting the data on it.

Microsoft Rolls Out Test of New Internet Explorer 8

Microsoft Corp on Wednesday made available a test version of Internet Explorer 8, the next edition of its Web browser.

At Microsoft's MIX08 online technology conference, Dean Hachamovitch, general manager of Microsoft's Internet Explorer team, provided a first glimpse at the successor to IE 7, which was released in October 2006.

Microsoft's Internet Explorer Web browser is the world's most widely-used Web browser with a greater market share than Apple Inc's Safari or Mozilla's Firefox. The browser is also part of the ongoing battle between Microsoft and arch-rival Google Inc.

Firefox is closely affiliated with Google, which provided around 85 percent of the revenue of Firefox's parent organization, the Mozilla Foundation, which was $66.8 million in 2006, according to filings

published last October.

Google distributes Firefox as its preferred browser software in a number of its own products. Mozilla continues to receive revenue from Google under a contract set to expire in November 20, 2008.

Microsoft's presentation was catered heavily toward Web developers, but Hachamovitch showed some user features of IE 8. One feature allows users to save work being done on a Web site to the local computer when an Internet connection goes down.

Another feature lets users highlight an address on a Web site and then see a map within the Web site with a single click. Users can also highlight a product name and be able to see if the item is available for sale on eBay (EBAY.O).

The new browser is available to developers at http://www.microsoft.com/ie/ie8.

Earlier this week, Microsoft announced the new browser would use the most-standards-compliant mode by default in rendering Web sites.

That means Web sites will essentially look the same regardless of browser and developers will not need to do multiple versions of Web sites for different browsers.

It's a departure from what Microsoft did in IE 7 and seen as a move to assuage developer, regulatory and legal concerns.

The European Union launched a new antitrust investigation into Microsoft to probe complaints from Norwegian browser maker Opera Software about how Microsoft ensures rival Web browsers are not fully compatible with Internet Explorer.

Critics argue that Internet Explorer is inferior to rival browsers and Microsoft maintains its lead because Explorer comes standard with the company's Windows operating system.

Microsoft also said it was making available a test or "beta" version of its Silverlight 2 multimedia technology. Silverlight 2 is the next version of Microsoft's competitor to Adobe Systems Inc.'s.

eBay Sees Growing Risks to Business in Coming Year

Online auction leader eBay Inc warned in an annual report on Friday that it faces difficulty getting former customers to return, adding to the normal challenge of attracting new users to its sites.

In its annual shareholder filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, eBay cited a variety of new threats to its business that reflect "changing customers demands."

EBay acknowledged that its main auction business faces slowing growth in each of its top three markets.

"We face challenges in the U.S., U.K. and Germany, which are our three largest markets, as growth of listings, active users and GMV on the

eBay.com platform in those countries has slowed," the company said in the regulatory filing.

GMV is gross merchandise volume, the total value of goods and services sold on eBay sites - on which eBay takes a cut in the form of transaction fees.

Adding to the risks in the coming year is expected weaker consumer spending in each of these three major markets, it said. At the same time, overall growth in the e-commerce market is expected to continue to decelerate, the company cautioned.

Wall Street analysts, on average, expect eBay this year to earn revenue of $8.7 billion, a rise of 14 percent on 2007.

EBay revenue has suffered a dramatic slowing of growth in recent years - down from rates of 30 percent to 40 percent.

In a discussion of potential risks to growth and profitability, eBay added the need to "reactivate former users," adding to the typical Web business concerns about attracting new users and keeping existing users active.

The San Jose, California-based company also acknowledged that significant changes made in January in fees and policies on its marketplaces have been controversial with many sellers.

"If these changes cause sellers to move their business away from our sites or otherwise fail to improve gross merchandise volume or the number of successful listings, our operating results and profitability will be harmed," eBay said.

The language of eBay's annual report underscores previous warnings the company has made about slowing growth. In January it reported solid fourth-quarter results but said it expected 2008 revenue to grow only 12 percent - well below the 18 percent that analysts, on average, had predicted at the time.

Jeffries & Co analyst Youssef Squali said the pessimistic language eBay uses to describe its business prospects reflect a growing awareness that eBay is no longer the only game in town for merchants. Rivals such as Amazon.com are enjoying surging growth in its merchant business as eBay slows.

EBay has also been suffering one of its periodic seller revolts in response to the recent round of price changes.

But Squali said the impact of the latest "sellers' strike" has yet to be reflected in any dramatic fall-off in auction listings. "The buyers don't go on strike," he said, but added: "Now sellers are looking for new options off of eBay."

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